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Security Council

Seventy-first year

Provisional

7612th meeting

Wednesday, 27 January 2016, 10.10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Rosselli	(Uruguay)
Members:	Angola	Mr. Gimolieca
	China	Mr. Shen Bo
	Egypt	Mr. Aboulatta
	France	Mr. Stehelin
	Japan	Mr. Yoshikawa
	Malaysia	Mr. Ibrahim
	New Zealand	Mr. Van Bohemen
	Russian Federation	Mr. Churkin
	Senegal	Mr. Seck
	Spain	Mr. Oyarzun Marchesi
	Ukraine	Mr. Yelchenko
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Rycroft
	United States of America	Ms. Power
	Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)	Mr. Ramírez Carreño

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015) (S/2016/60)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015) (S/2016/60)

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Stephen O'Brien, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator; and Ms. Ertharin Cousin, Executive Director of the United Nations World Food Programme.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2016/60, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015).

I now give the floor to Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: For over five long years, the Syrian people have endured one of the most savage and brutal conflicts of the twenty-first century. The facts speak for themselves: over 250,000 people killed; well over a million injured; 6.5 million displaced within Syria; almost 4.6 million refugees; and much of the remaining population — some 13.5 million people — in dire need of humanitarian assistance. We must never forget that behind each of these figures are the individual and personal stories of girls, boys, women and men whose lives have been uprooted, whose dreams for the future have been shattered, and who have witnessed and been subjected to unspeakable fear and suffering.

This week, political talks are scheduled to begin, led by Special Envoy De Mistura. I offer him once again the full support of the humanitarian community in his vital endeavour. We must all get behind his tireless efforts to find a political solution to this shameful tragedy. This political process offers a genuine window of opportunity for the international community to come together and find solutions that reduce suffering and bring an end to the conflict. I cannot stress enough that we must not let this opportunity pass.

Since the adoption of resolution 2139 (2014) two years ago, the Secretary-General has reported month after month on the parties' disregard for international humanitarian and human rights law, their repeated non-compliance with the Council's demands on protection of civilians and humanitarian access, and the humanitarian catastrophe that has ensued. This month's report (S/2016/60) is equally as depressing as those before it, highlighting how the human and social cost of this conflict continues to spiral out of control. This vicious cycle of death and destruction carries the grave risk of being seen as having become, in many ways, the new normal in Syria as the search for a political solution continues. But the death, suffering and wanton destruction and disregard for the law should never be seen as normal. This tragedy is man-made. It is hideous but it is avoidable. And we — the Security Council — must come together to stop it.

Every time we think we have reached the nadir of human suffering in this crisis, it continues to sink deeper and deeper before our eyes. The recent pictures of emaciated, starving children in the besieged town of Madaya seemingly shocked the collective conscience of the world. The humanitarian missions to Madaya and the similarly besieged areas of Zabadani, Fu'ah and Kafraya, undertaken by the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) over the past two weeks have delivered desperately needed food, medical and other aid sufficient for one month for over 60,000 people in total.

The original list of those requiring urgent medical evacuation was 19. All of those people have been evacuated. In fact, a total of 37 people out of 400 requiring medical attention have been evacuated. We urgently need to get more medical supplies and teams into Madaya. The last time SARC was able to enter with supplies and teams was 15 January. Many of those remaining need treatment where they are, rather than evacuation. Simple treatments and supplies can provide the care required. We do not know if there are others who require evacuation. That is why it is vital we be able to get independent medical teams in to assess the most appropriate medical care for the sick and injured.

Humanitarian conditions in these areas remain severe and critical, particularly the health of civilians

in Madaya. Negotiations continue to allow the free safe passage — let me repeat, safe passage — of others in both locations whose lives are at serious risk. These negotiations with all parties must conclude urgently to avoid more senseless death and suffering. In the meantime, health supplies in Madaya are dwindling fast, and recent United Nations and SARC requests to the Syrian authorities for medical teams to enter Madaya must be approved without delay or hindrance. We also need similar, immediate safe access to Fu'ah and Kafraya as conditions there also continue to deteriorate sharply.

And why do we negotiate? Why do we request safe access from all parties, but principally the Syrian Government? We do so because although the Council has adopted a resolution to allow for safe, unimpeded access, that access does not always exist for the brave women and men on the ground trying to deliver assistance into these areas. Some simply say to me: "The United Nations should break the sieges", but that would be reckless. It would ential sending convoy drivers and humanitarian workers into the line of fire.

To be frank, the situation in Madaya is only the tip of the iceberg. More and more people are living in areas that are under siege or are harder to reach than ever before. We are continually monitoring the situation on the ground throughout Syria, and based on the latest information we estimate that some 4.6 million people are in hard-to-reach areas, subject to various forms of restrictions on the movement of people and goods that severely limit their access to services and humanitarian assistance. Of that number, we estimate that some 486,700 people are currently living in besieged areas — 274,200 people besieged by the Government of Syria; 200,000 by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL); and 12,500 by non-State armed groups and the Al-Nusra Front.

The continued use of siege and starvation as a weapon of war is reprehensible. The Secretary-General has said that such tactics can constitute a war crime. They must stop immediately. The primary responsibility lies with the party that maintains the siege and routinely and systematically denies people the basic necessities of life. However, other parties that conduct military activities in or from populated areas, using civilians as shields and endangering their safety, also bear their share of responsibility for the immense suffering in besieged areas. And those with influence on the parties can demand it stops. I ask them to do so. Now.

The indiscriminate use of weapons on civilians, residential areas, aid supply routes and civilian infrastructure protected under international law continues, outrageously, with total impunity. Over the past few weeks alone, hundreds of civilians have been killed or injured in direct or indiscriminate attacks by all parties, due to the continued use of explosive weapons in populated areas, including through barrel bombs and other aerial weapons, shelling and car bombs.

For example, on 12 January, reports indicate that airstrikes on Ma'arat al-Numan city, in rural Idlib, killed 33 people, while airstrikes on Sarmada town, in northern Idlib, reportedly killed 29 persons on the same day. In Madimayet, rural Damascus, at least 5 people were killed and 25 more injured when two mortars landed in the city centre on 23 January. Meanwhile, a recent ISIL offensive on besieged Deir ez-Zour city has reportedly resulted in the death of large numbers of civilians, and we also remain extremely concerned about unverified reports of deaths related to severe malnutrition in the city.

Attacks on hospitals and schools continue unabated, with grave repercussions for all civilians, including the 2 million children out of school. In 2015, according to UNICEF, some 35 schools were attacked, with one in four schools closed, damaged or destroyed. Meanwhile, Physicians for Human Rights documented at least 112 attacks on medical facilities — an average of one every three days — as well as the deaths of 107 medical personnel last year.

We have asked the Council repeatedly to demand that the parties to the conflict facilitate unhindered, unconditional and sustained access across Syria, but that is simply not happening. Active conflict and insecurity are limiting factors, but all parties to the conflict continue to deliberately delay or obstruct the delivery of aid. While we continue to do everything in our power to press the parties and influential stakeholders to reach people in need across Syria, restrictions on aid delivery remain a routine and systematic occurrence.

Despite our persistent and unrelenting efforts, our ability to access hard-to-reach and besieged locations remains severely hampered by the pitiful approval rate for inter-agency convoys by the Syrian authorities. In 2015, just over 10 per cent of the 113 requests for inter-agency convoys resulted in the delivery of much-

needed humanitarian and life-saving assistance. A further 10 per cent were approved in principle but could not proceed due to a lack of final approval, insecurity or lack of agreement on safe passage. The United Nations placed some 3 per cent of requests on hold due to insecurity, and almost 75 per cent of requests went unanswered by the Government of Syria. Such inaction is simply unacceptable for a State Member of the United Nations and a signatory to the United Nations Charter.

The impact on the ground is tangible: in 2013, we reached some 2.9 million people through the inter-agency convoy mechanism, but this past year only 620,000. On 11 January, the United Nations requested approval from the Government of Syria to conduct inter-agency convoys to 46 besieged and hard-to-reach areas during the first quarter of 2016. As of 27 January, 16 days later, we have not received all of the necessary approvals for any of these requests. If all these convoys, which remain one of the most effective and efficient ways to reach people across conflict lines, could proceed, we could reach an estimated 1.7 million people in need today who are being subjected to unnecessary and avoidable suffering owing to the parties' indifference to fulfilling their basic international legal obligations.

We are in a race against time. More and more people are slipping out of our reach every day as the conflict intensifies and battle lines tighten. In 2015, the United Nations delivered humanitarian assistance to less than 10 per cent of people in hard-to-reach areas and only around 1 per cent in besieged areas. From our side, the United Nations remains committed to the safe delivery of neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian aid to all people directly affected by the fighting, based on need and vulnerability — never on political considerations. We stand ready to scale up assistance as soon as security conditions and more sustainable access allow. Resources are also vital, and I encourage all Member States to pledge generously at the upcoming London Conference on 4 February for the desperate people inside Syria and for those who have fled into the neighbouring countries. The United Nations and its partners will be able to do our job the best way possible only when we are fully resourced.

At the same time, the Council and Member States with influence must take further steps to ensure that the parties comply with their obligations under international law and the demands of the Council contained in resolution 2139 (2014). Specifically, this will require urgent measures now to ensure that the parties, first, stop targeting civilians, as well as civilian infrastructure, including medical facilities, schools and other infrastructure and services which people depend upon for their survival, including targeted or indiscriminate attacks, as well as the use of explosive weapons or landmines in populated areas, at all times.

Secondly, the parties must also facilitate full, unhindered, unconditional and sustained access to all people in need, including in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, for all types of assistance, including medical and surgical supplies. This must include, for example, immediate approval of the outstanding requests for inter-agency cross-line convoys by the Syrian authorities. Non-State armed groups and listed terrorist groups must also facilitate the deliveries that they are preventing.

Thirdly, the parties must allow freedom of movement for civilians of all ages to enter and exit besieged and hard-to-reach areas in safety and dignity, and permit the immediate medical evacuation of sick and wounded patients to a safe place for treatment.

Even with the worsening situation and continued access challenges, humanitarian workers in Syria continue to stay and deliver aid, often at great personal risk. Humanitarian organizations — both United Nations and non-United Nations — are dedicating unprecedented resources and efforts to reach Syrians in need. Together, we delivered aid to millions of people in 2015, including food assistance to nearly 6 million people per month and health assistance to almost 16 million, and we provided 6.7 million people with water, sanitation and hygiene support, and 4.8 million with basic household items.

I salute the efforts of the thousands of — mostly Syrian — staff and volunteers of the United Nations; the Syrian Arab Red Crescent; the non-governmental organizations (NGOs); the first responders; and the staff of hospitals and clinics throughout the country, who carry out their duties day after day in the face of political pressure and, in some cases, violence and intimidation from the parties to the conflict.

I remind the Council that each day the United Nations and its partners are served by humanitarian heroes: women and men who are willing to risk their lives leading convoys into conflict zones to reach the people who are so desperately in need. We should all be inspired by their example, and we should all salute them. The failure in Syria is a political failure, most

definitely not a failure on the part of these brave women and men and the humanitarian organizations that they represent.

I especially pay tribute to the 82 colleagues who have lost their lives in the line of duty, including an international NGO staff member from GOAL, killed by an improvised explosive device in Idlib just two days ago.

Let me be clear: the continued suffering of the people in Syria cannot be blamed on the humanitarian organizations and staff; it is the failure of both the parties and the international community that has allowed this conflict to continue for far too long. And try as we may, humanitarian action cannot be a substitute for political action. The only solution is through a political dialogue that reduces and ultimately ends the violence. The key stakeholders in the Syria crisis must do what has never been done up to this point and put people before politics.

On the eve of further political talks, it is my hope, and the hope of all humanitarians, that the key stakeholders will finally take the bold, unselfish and courageous decisions necessary to put an end to this ruinous war and the unimaginable suffering it has brought to the Syrian people.

Over the last five years, the Council has demonstrated that when there is political will and a unity of purpose, it is capable of reaching agreement and taking decisive action to deal with the challenges of the conflict in Syria. The Council has taken action on chemical weapons in Syria; it has authorized cross-border humanitarian assistance; and it has taken action recently to launch a political process.

But for the millions of people trapped under siege, malnourished and lacking basic supplies, the Council has simply not done enough. We have left those people with no hope. They believe that the world has forgotten them.

As this conflict approaches its sixth year, now is the time for those Council members with influence on the parties to put their differences aside and come together, at the most senior political levels, to find ways to improve access to the millions of Syrians who remain trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. The Syrian people cannot wait any longer.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Mr. O'Brien for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Cousin.

Ms. Cousin: Mr. President, I wish to thank you for this opportunity.

Ten months ago, in this very Chamber, I reported to the Council the World Food Programme's (WFP) grave concern at the deepening humanitarian crisis inside Syria (see S/PV.7433). I discussed the increasing hardship and deprivation facing people in besieged areas, leading not only to despair but also to malnutrition, starvation and death.

I called for the Council's support for redoubling efforts enabling the entire international humanitarian system to access people in cut-off and hard-to-reach areas. Today I not only reiterate the call for help; I implore the Council for its assistance. The most powerful tool at the disposal of the United Nations for the prevention and protection of civilians — enshrined in international humanitarian law — is strong, qualitative consensus.

Because the reality is more severe, the situation today is also more severe than when I addressed the Council 10 months ago. More than 4.6 million people, as my colleague noted, are trapped in besieged or hard-to-reach areas, and our food-security analysis suggests that 2.5 million are severely food-insecure inside these areas. Every day we receive alarming reports of a lack of food and water and of acute malnutrition and death. Food security requires not only food but also access to water, sanitation and essential medical treatment. Let us not allow populations in other locations to suffer the same fate as Madaya if they are not already suffering. As I am speaking to the Council now, we estimate that there are 18 besieged areas and close to half a million people cut off from food and other crucial humanitarian assistance. In many of them, people are running out, or may already have run out, of food. We simply do not know. It is just a matter of time before the brutal images we have witnessed these past few weeks hit our screens again. UNICEF and the Ministry of Health have been conducting assessments across the country, and severe cases of acute malnutrition are surfacing in horrendous numbers.

More than half of these places have been besieged for a shocking three years. Some of their populations can be found in parts of rural Damascus where the WFP has not been able to provide food assistance for three years and where we know the price of food is more than double, and sometimes even triple, what it is in Damascus. Moadamiyah borders Damascus city and was one of the most contested locations at the beginning of the crisis. In 2014, a reconciliation agreement was

reached between the Government and armed groups that allowed the first inter-agency convoy to enter Moadamiyah in July of that year. After the agreement was reached, people were able to leave and enter the city through a single checkpoint, carrying small amounts of food for their daily needs. However, unfortunately, the checkpoint was closed in December 2015, and 44,000 people are now besieged inside the city. Directly after the siege was lifted, people rushed to the small shops to buy the food items that were available, and that accelerated the price increases. Many items, such as wheat flour, beans, pasta, lentils, oil and meat, are now available only in very limited quantities. Fruits are unavailable, in fact non-existent. What is most heartbreaking is that this location is a mere 15-minute drive from the WFP's Damascus office, and yet we cannot help.

In Darayya city, where farming has stopped because of the heavy incidence of landmines, we have recorded similar sharp price increases. Most people consume just one meal a day. Together with the international community, the WFP has continued to appeal for access to these and other besieged and hard-to-reach locations. The Council heard from my colleague about the success, or lack of it, we have had with our inter-agency requests. To date, more than 60 per cent of the requests that the WFP has made have simply not received an answer. The meagre number of positive responses we did get were then tied up in bureaucratic procedures that resulted in zero access to these besieged areas throughout 2015. We had recent breakthroughs just this month. They have enabled us to reach a mere 24 per cent of the besieged locations, with one-off support in Idlib governorate, where opposition groups have been blocking assistance to some 12,500 vulnerable Syrians.

I should also note that half the besieged population — an estimated 200,000 people — are trapped inside Deir ez-Zor, which the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) took control of in July 2014. Deir ez-Zor has largely been inaccessible to humanitarian assistance since May of last year. ISIL currently controls most areas of the governorate, while the airport, along with five of the city's neighbourhoods, is under the control of the Syrian Government. It has been reported that ISIL targets the besieged locations on an almost daily basis, resulting in civilian fatalities and injuries. ISIL maintains extremely tight control over these cities, with little prospects for negotiation.

The Damascus highway, the primary road for taking supplies to Deir ez-Zor city, remains closed due to the ongoing conflict, which means that the airport is the only corridor through which to bring in commodities, including food from outside. The WFP has been authorized to airlift into Deir ez-Zor. However, owing to a combination of reasons — the extensive damage that has been done to the runway, a lack of air-space security for our planes and the inability of our staff and partners to distribute — we have been powerless to assist those in need in Deir ez-Zor. At the moment, small commercial airplanes carrying small quantities of food are able to land, but this situation has resulted in the highest price increases in the whole country. The purchasing power of households has consequently dropped to alarming levels, with people's access to food limited as their financial wherewithal for buying food in the markets has been almost erased. In fact, a month's supply of basic food items costs some LS240,000, 10 times what it would be in Damascus.

The truth is, the requirement in resolutions 2165 (2014) and 2139 (2014) that assistance not be impeded or hindered has yet to be fully realized. Despite some local successes, we do not have the access necessary to reach the hungry and those in need. The fact is, our persistent efforts to make gains in besieged and hard-to-reach areas are still thwarted by many obstacles. The physical and logistical challenges often pale in comparison to the numerous checkpoints our vehicles and staff must pass through, the presence of security forces in our warehouses, the burdensome administrative procedures surrounding the loading and sealing of our trucks and the lengthy bilateral negotiations necessary to get facilitation letters signed off on — not to mention the presence of radical armed groups such as ISIL.

The time for fully and collectively implementing the Council's resolutions is long overdue. Access must not be arbitrary, ad hoc or one-time. Effective access must not require unreasonable approvals. It must be reasonably safe, regular, transparent and accountable.

The Council can rest assured that the World Food Programme and its partners will continue to do their utmost to overcome these barriers and hurdles and provide lifesaving assistance. We will continue with our steadfast efforts, exhausting every means at our disposal, reaching every child, woman and man in Syria where we can. Yet we cannot and do not perform alone. Of course, we work with others from the United

Nations country teams and our 40 non-governmental organization partners.

Let me be very clear: to prevent imminent starvation, we need the support and action of every Council member and every Member State. Preventing mass starvation requires more than a four-town agreement. Preventing a humanitarian crisis requires that humanitarian organizations have unimpeded and sustained access in order to deliver immediate relief, including food, to all those in need in Syria. Preventing a humanitarian crisis requires humanitarian pauses and unconditional, monitored ceasefires to enable food and other urgent assistance to be delivered to civilians and to support the necessary vaccination and other health campaigns. Preventing a humanitarian crisis — and a food nutrition security crisis — requires a halt to attacks on civilian infrastructure. Preventing a humanitarian crisis requires ensuring freedom of movement for all civilians and the immediate lifting of all sieges by all parties. That is the only way to end hunger and treat malnutrition, child by child, adult by adult, town by town.

Paulo Coelho has said that the world is changed by our example, not by our opinion. Our responsibility is to ensure that the decisions and choices made in this Chamber become reality on the ground. That is the only way we can save and protect people and enable Syria's next generation to heal.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank the Executive Director of the World Food Programme for her briefing.

I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.40 a.m.